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SACRED REVERSALS: TRICKSTER IN GERALD VIZENOR'S *EARTHDIVERS: TRIBAL NARRATIVES ON MIXED DESCENT*

by
Franchot Ballinger

"EARTHDIVERS," says Gerald Vizenor at the beginning of *Earthdivers: Tribal Narratives on Mixed Descent* (1981), is "an imaginative metaphor." The vehicle for this metaphor is a culture hero (sometimes trickster, like Wenebojo in the Ojibwe story Vizenor cites in his preface) found extensively in native American myth. This figure directs animals to dive into the great flood until one finally returns with grains of dirt from which the hero magically creates the present earth mass. The tenor of the metaphor is Vizenor's protagonists, the "mixedbloods, or Métis, tribal tricksters and recast culture heroes, the mournful heirs and survivors from that premier union between the daughters of the woodland shamans and white fur traders. The Métis or mixedblood earthdivers in these stories dive into unknown urban places now, into the racial darkness in the cities, to create a new consciousness of coexistence" (ix). Traditionally standing between two cultures, the Métis earthdiver will integrate America's divided anima. Furthermore, "in the metaphor of the Métis earthdiver, white settlers are summoned to dive with mixedblood survivors into the unknown . . . to swim deep down . . . in search of a few honest words upon which to build a new urban turtle island" (ix).

To lead us to such creative realization, the Métis earthdiver must also be a trickster, for "the world must be realized through inversions and opposites, sacred and secular reversals" of the sort associated with tricksters (123). Because Vizenor refers frequently to his characters as tricksters and to their reversals and "contradances," the trickster element is apparent throughout the twenty-one mainly satirical narratives of *Earthdivers*. Because the association of the blood with the earthdiver-trickster is Vizenor's own, rather than one found in the oral traditions, what might be less apparent is that Vizenor's tricksters are very much those of native American oral traditions, even if their trickery is in the contemporary world.

Whether Vizenor's rendering or that of the oral tradition, trickster is an elusive figure. Like a subatomic particle, he defies final definition of time, place and character. (Perhaps the Dakotas were suggesting as much when they ended stories about the trickster Ikto with "and from then on, who knows where Ikto went next.") Vizenor acknowledges

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this elusiveness by rejecting the trickster of categorized and defined properties: that is, the trickster who is gluttonous, lascivious, greedy, deceptive, creative, destructive. He demonstrates that ultimately trickster is best experienced as a dramatization of event and process, not fixed in the amber of description. Trickster is, after all, always travelling, and we might add, almost in apposition, *transgressing, becoming, transforming, making*. In Vizenor, we can see that an authoritative discussion of trickster would be carried on in verbal, not in terminal adjectives. No doubt, this trickster is no less elusive, but we can better comprehend the nature of his power.

To begin with, we must consider a major source of trickster's power—his ambiguous marginality. Vizenor treats this theme in terms of the dynamic. Trickster is a transgression of the "purities" of society's accepted strata and conventions. To be sure, Vizenor's tricksters are marginal first of all because they are mixed-bloods and thus act between two worlds, while the traditional trickster is marginal because he violates established rules and values; nevertheless, marginality is fundamental to the powers of both. From the reversals and transgressions of Coyote and Wenebojo often come creativity, magic power and other special benefits. From the mixed-blood marginality of Vizenor's tricksters can come the realization of a new turtle island. The world regards such figures ambivalently because mixed blood and the concomitance of rule-breaking and creation are themselves ambiguities. But by quoting Donald Davidson on metaphor, Vizenor suggests that ambiguity is itself a force: "perhaps, then, we can explain metaphor as a kind of ambiguity; in the context of a metaphor, certain words have either a new or an original meaning; and the force of the metaphor depends on our uncertainty as we waver between the two meanings. . . ." (xvii). Similarly ambiguous, Vizenor's Métis tricksters, as they "waver and forbear extinction in two world's . . . are the force in the blood and the uncertain word. . . ." (xvii). The ambiguous marginal trickster brings new meaning and force to the language of experience, liberating us in the process from conventional notions, just as the ambiguity of metaphor infuses perception with creative meaning and reveals the limitations of stereotyped seeing.

Metaphor also figures significantly in Vizenor's treatment of tricksters' defiance of accepted categories and norms. Vizenor quotes Susan Stewart's *Nonsense*: "The systematic violation of categories and norms of behavior that the trickster presents appears as a negation, a reversal, an inversion of those cultural categories and behavior norms that make up common sense . . . . As the embodiment of disparate domains, trickster is analogous to the process of metaphor, the incorporation of opposites into a new configuration" (105). Thus in the Ojibwe earth-

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diver myth the creative joins the scatalogical as Wenebojo creates earth to escape his own feces floating in the Deluge. In other stories, some capricious act of Coyote's brings permanent death to humans, but he gets himself out of trouble with them by rationalizing that without death the world would become too crowded: a caprice rationalized becomes a sensible part of the scheme of things. In their contrary behavior, Vizenor's tricksters, like traditional tricksters, repeatedly stand akimbo the established categories and codes, freeing us from spiritual and imaginative enslavement to what Vizenor calls "terminal creeds." Captain Shammer says in "The Chair of Tears", "The trickster seeks the balance in contraries and the contraries in balance" (20), and "in the white face of the obvious, the opposite must be done" (9). In "Blue Boom Ceremonial," a Lumbee economist shows through his satirical inversions (for example, his insistence that laughter is a dance) that Indianness is a "*way* of doing and being that is 'Indian,' not what is done or the blood quantum of the doer" (67). Similarly, Pink Stallion teaches his students, (who are "invented" Indians, that is, living the image of Indians invented by whites) more authentic tribal ways of seeing. For example, he negates his students' affected solemnity about their Indianness when to Token White's protest that "satire is not sacred" he reponds, "Mother Earth is satire" (and, incidentally, legitimizes the satirical mode of Vizenor's book as a sacred reversal or opposition) (171).

The new "configuration" that the traditional trickster's contrary behavior brings about realizes our, and the world's, creativity. This makes trickster a literary representation of the forces dramatized ceremonially in native American sacred clowns. In their trickster-like buffoonery, Navajo and Pueblo clowns topple the conventional and defy the formal outlines of ritualism to contribute to the creative power of ceremony. We should also note that their ugly, poor, bedraggled appearance belies the power they possess. Similarly, the contrary behavior of the Heyoka, behavior which violates all definitions of "common sense," conceals the power they possess. Like trickster, the clowns do not *appear* suited for the creative powers they in fact exercise.

In "Natural Tilts," Vizenor reveals the powers of his shaman-trickster-clowns: "Some shaman sprites and tricksters are spiritual healers, with warm hands and small medicine bundles loaded with secret remedies, and some shaman spirits are clowns who can tell and reveal the opposites of the world in sacred reversals, natural tilts in double visions, interior glories. The shaman clowns and tricksters are transformed in familiar places and spaces from common grammars, the past and the present in the shape of animals and birds" (89). While there are few transformations of the latter sort in *Earthdivers*,

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reversals are clearly part of the shamanic powers of Vizenor's trickster-clowns. In "The Chair of Tears," a title whose tragic allusion is the contrary of the story's satirical content, Captain Shammer appears on campus the first time "dressed in the uniform of a general, ritual clowns bearing the estranged mask of General George Custer" (4). Appointed chairman of the Department of American Indian Studies, he proposes to save the department by selling it to the highest bidder. In the middle of a comic exchange with Ramon, the mixed-blood black departmental secretary, Shammer quotes one of Black Elk's more elegiac pronouncements. All of this is a sign that Shammer, like a sacred clown, is a contrary and a "person of *magical ethos*, [revealing a] connection of satire with magical power" (4).

Father Bearald One ("The Sociodowser") is another trickster-shaman-clown. Dressed in the clothes of a cleric (his father was rumoured to be a Roman Catholic Priest), Bearald One also wears in the summer one conventional shoe and one "plain black rubber zipper overshoe." When an Indian Center board member asks to see his foot, Bearald One refuses, but Heyoka-like his "no" briefly seems to become "yes," for almost immediately he moves to comply. "But rather than showing his foot in the overshoe, he remove[s] the shoe on his other foot, his normal foot, because no one specified which foot [although which foot is intended is clear]. Then he remove[s] his sock and stretche[s] and wriggle[s] his angular toes in the direction of the board members" (154). Yet this apparently doddering, foolish man is himself a reversal, for he possesses sacred power. Father Bearald One moves with *jiibayag*, tribal spirits, "on the wind from dark woods," hears voices and visits "distant places in his dreams" (144). He also engages his powers in somewhat more secular activities: divining the whereabouts of the Indian Center vans after their confiscation by the government and mysteriously fixing Center bingo games in favor of the most needy. First his strangeness and then his powers make corrupt members of the Center board uneasy, but Bearald One is quite comfortable enough; for this trickster, the Center is "an appropriate place in the world to chance to outwit evil and balance the universe" (159).

Native American oral traditions have proved very resilient in the face of their world's imbalance caused by white incursions. This is obvious in their adapting traditional themes to contemporary circumstances. (Witness, for example, stories of trickster and the WPA or anthropologists.) Vizenor's placing mixed-blood earthdiver-tricksters in the contemporary urban world is, then, within the tradition. And like the Navajo Ma'i, who, Yellowman told Barre Toelken, reveals what is possible, Vizenor's tricksters too reveal the possible. Standing at the brink between tribal tradition and modern colonial America,

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seeing all of its imbalance, they challenge us to dive. The challenge accepted, we discover that the inspiration and power of life are in the world of contraries, the trickster's world. We discover, as Vizenor says in another context, that "respiration and transpiration are possible under water" (166).

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